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COMMUNITY CONTROL OF URBAN SCHOOLS -- LESSONS FROM THE SUBURBAN EXPERIENCE[1]

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ABSTRACT

Community control of inner-city schools first was proposed by parents in the Harlem section of New York City in 1966. The proposal aimed at improving the quality of public schools serving low income minority youngsters by providing for school accountability to parental representatives. In practice, the two cities that have tried to provide some measure of community control - New York City and Detroit - have utilized for this purpose decentralized sub-districts based upon the suburban school district model rather than upon the original school staff accountability model. It is argued here that while suburban districts do facilitate community control, this occurs because such districts are fiscally dependent upon a population which possesses a relatively high level of organizational skills, two characteristics lacking in most inner-city sub-districts. To ensure community control in the inner-city will require provision of functional substitutes for the two characteristics that prove important for control purposes in the suburbs.

Community Control and School Accountability

The extremity of the problems facing public schools serving low income inner-city populations, among whom minorities predominate[2], has evoked equally extreme proposals for the reform of these schools. As has been well documented[3], among inner-city schools, average levels of

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1 Revised version of paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., March 30-April 3, 1975.

2 Data on demographic trends in the 29 largest metropolitan areas of the United States, including changes in the proportion of black students enrolled in public schools, are provided by Farley (1975).

3 See, for example, Coleman et al., (1966).

student achievement typically run three years behind national norms, and the high school dropout rate is close to 50 percent. Remedies proposed in recent years, and attempted in varying degrees, center around one or other of three distinct policy options. Essentially these are desegregation, compensatory education, and community control. Of the three policies, outside the southern states only compensatory education has been adopted widely, chiefly for the reason that since 1965 the federal government has made available one billion dollars annually for compensatory programs under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Unfortunately, to date there is no evidence that compensatory programs are effective in resolving the achievement problem.[4] Persistence of the problem means persistence of demands from leaders of urban minorities for one or other of the two remaining policy alternatives; desegregation and community control.[5]

Of the two policies, while desegregation has made the most progress, outside the South it has been implemented only minimally in large cities, usually in response to court order, and only rarely as a consequence of school board leadership.

Failure of urban school systems to move beyond token desegregation leaves minority community leaders with the option of pressing for the third policy alternative directed toward improving learning outcomes from public schooling - community control.[6] This particular initiative originated within the black community, whose members have been especially sensitive to educational issues as a consequence of the work of the civil rights movement since the early 1950s.

In the hope of improving the lagging average levels of academic achievement in black schools, the original proposal for community control presented to the New York City Board of Education in 1966 sought:

> to alter the relationship between administrators of the existing system and the people in such a way as to bring the services offered more closely into line with what is desired by the clientele (Wilcox, 1966: 15).

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4 For a survey of relevant research see Averch et al., (1972).

5 The sequential emergence of these three alternative policies is discussed in Scribner and O'Shea (1974).

6 Of course, one can question whether introducing more community control will positively influence student learning. Wilcox (1966) argued strongly that it would, but without supporting evidence. For a discussion of this issue see O'Shea (1976: 325-28).

Means proposed for altering existing patterns of parent-administrator relationships included: (1) staff accountability to parental representatives for student learning; (2) parental participation in the selection of school principals; (3) use of school facilities and resources for community social and economic development (see Wilcox, 1966).

Had this original model of community control been adopted it would indeed have substantially altered parent-school relationships, and generated major changes in the schooling experience of minority students. However, in practice, since 1966 the concept of community control has experienced a considerable transformation. The control structure being tried at present in New York City and Detroit is modeled not on accountability at the school site, but on the pattern of decentralized governance characteristic of the suburbs. Both cities have created sub-districts, or community regions, within their existing city-wide school district. Detroit has eight regions, or sub-districts. New York City has 31 community school districts. In both cities these sub-districts have elected boards, with some power over policy, and over the appointment of their local superintendent of schools, but major decisions concerning budget, personnel, and the instructional program still are made at the city-wide school board level.

It will be argued here that this current approach lacks elements crucial for community control. It fails to recognize that while suburban parents, for the most part, actually do control their school districts, two interrelated conditions that provide suburban residents the leverage to exert control are not present in the inner-city sub-districts of New York or Detroit. The first of these conditions is dependence upon local property tax revenue. The second is that suburban school districts typically, though by no means exclusively, have predominantly white collar populations among whom organizational skills and related resources are well provided. These characteristics allow concerned parents to mobilize community support behind educational issues as need arises.

Minority community leaders in the inner-city who wish to pressure their local sub-district school system face a double hazard. First of all, it is notoriously difficult to mobilize the relatively unorganized residents of inner-city neighborhoods behind any public issue, including schools. Second, even if a sub-district could be mobilized, the overall city school system is not dependent exclusively upon either that sub-district population, or its property tax base. To provide inner-city communities with the means to exert real influence on the policies governing their public schools requires, therefore, that these communities be provided with functional substitutes for the two factors present in most suburban school districts - fiscal dependency upon the local population and organizational, or "mobilization" skills and resources within that population.

Among possible functional substitutes for these characteristics of suburban school districts, two appear to have the highest probability of being effective as means toward parental control in inner-city subdistricts. One is the original community control proposal - that school staffs be accountable to parents at the school-site level for the attainment of mutually agreed upon objectives, a concept now also attracting attention among influential persons in the white population under the label of "school-site management."[7]

A second strategy, either by itself or preferably in combination with school-site accountability, would be to adopt the precedent of the war on poverty and invest public funds in community action programs aimed at developing an organizational infra-structure in inner-city communities that could provide a support base and staff services for parents, thus providing them some leverage in their negotiations with school system officials. Before developing these suggestions, it will help to review briefly the origins of the community control movement, and then to look closer at the pattern of relationships between parents and the schools in suburban systems.

Origins of Community Control

The demand for community control began in the black population in reaction to white refusal to desegregate urban schools in cities outside the south. The concept was articulated for the first time by parents in the East Harlem section of New York City in 1966, following Stokeley Carmichael's dramatic call for Black Power. This came at a time when the parents in East Harlem were confronting the city school board over the latter's proposal to open a new intermediate school, IS201, in the center of Harlem, despite Board policy to locate all new schools close to the boundary of minority communities, thus facilitating integration.

Faced with white refusal to work for an integrated system, black parents opted in effect for Carmichael's alternative - black nationalism. This ideology dictates black control over the institutions shaping the economic and cultural future of the black population, and schools are especially prominent among such institutions. To structure control over IS201, as noted earlier, Harlem parents demanded the authority to select the school principal and to hold the school staff accountable to parental representatives for the educational program and for learning outcomes.

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7 The concept of school site management is advanced in two state-wide reports on educational finance; the Fleischmann Report (1973) for New York and the Governor's Citizens' Committee (1973) for Florida. More recently, this same innovation has been proposed for San Francisco (See San Francisco Public Schools Commission, 1976).

Subsequent developments around the community control issue have been widely documented.[8] Briefly, though strongly opposed by professional educators in New York, the original proposal drew powerful support outside the school system, especially from leaders of the then newly formed community action programs and from Mayor Lindsay. Two community action groups, Massive Economic Neighborhood Development (MEND) and HARYOU-ACT, took on the task of mobilizing parents behind the demand for community control of IS201. Subsequently, these and other community action agencies provided the organizational base for three experimental districts that the New York City school system approved in 1967 to test out the community control idea. Support for this initiative came from the Mayor who, as Seeley (1970) recounts, encouraged the community action programs to work with parents on school issues, and was himself a critic of the educational failure of the schools in the inner-city. Also intervening in support of the community control idea was the Ford Foundation, the major source of funding for the three experimental districts.

Unfortunately, by 1968 one of these districts, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, became embroiled with the teachers' union over the question of personnel transfers, leading to a city-wide strike of all schools - a development that eventually led to the termination of the experimental districts. However, in 1971 the State Legislature finally enacted a Decentralization Law, grouping New York City's elementary and intermediate schools into 31 community school districts, each with an elected board. This new structure represents a compromise between parental demands for school-level control and educators' resistance to the obvious hazards of being held accountable to neighborhood parents.

The new community district boards have limited power, remaining subject to the central board with regard to budget, personnel, and instructional policies. Further, the limited governance powers devolved to community districts remain far from the site of the individual school, thus departing substantially from the original community control proposal.

The original proposal, once made in New York, evoked a responsive echo among minority leaders in many other cities. Despite its broad appeal at a time of rapidly growing nationalist sentiment in minority communities, and when urban riots were occurring to protest social and economic problems of the inner-city areas, only in Detroit was the actual governance structure of the school system changed, roughly along the lines adopted for New York City. In virtually all other urban school districts educators have been even more successful than those in

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8 For details of events surrounding the community control movement see LaNoue and Smith (1973).

Detroit and New York in displacing demands for community control, typically securing adoption of their preferred alternative - administrative decentralization.[9]

Some reasons why inner-city minority leaders have experienced relative failure in their attempts to restructure school-parent relationships, despite continued low average levels of student achievement and high dropout rates, become apparent from comparison of suburban and inner-city school systems, and from an understanding of the extent of professional dominance over educational decision making.

The Structure of Decision Making

In promoting community control, not uncommonly leaders of the black community contrast its relative absence in the inner-city to its evident presence in suburban areas. Kenneth Clark, for example, in his introduction to a book on the subject (Fantini et al, 1970) states:

> Community control of schools is a given in many of the towns, smaller cities and suburbs of the nation. If an epidemic of low academic achievement swept over these schools, drastic measures would be imposed. Administrators and school boards would topple, and teachers would be trained or dismissed. If students were regularly demeaned and dehumanized in those schools, cries of outrage in the PTA's would be heard - and listened to - and action to remove the offending personnel would be taken immediately. Accountability is so implicit a given that the term "community control" never is used by those who have it. "Community control," as this book makes clear, is to be understood rather as a demand for school accountability by parents to whom the schools have never accounted, particularly those parents of low status groups in Northern cities.

Clark emphasizes school accountability to parents, rather than invoking school board responsibility to mediate between parents and school staff. In this Clark follows Wilcox (1966), the articulator of the original community control proposal. School level accountability is, in fact, the approach dictated by the realities of educational decision making. In practice, as Zeigler and Jennings (1974: 5) report, while educational leadership formally rests with boards of education, informally board leadership customarily is delegated to the district

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9 A survey by Ornstein (1974: 5) shows 18 out of 21 school districts, with enrollments of 100,000 or more students, either had decentralized by 1973, or planned to do so, though invariably these districts restricted change to the restructuring of administration only, retaining a single elected governing board at the center.

superintendent. Similarly, Lyke (1970: 123) concludes that:

> Suburban education, even under a community control model, is by and large shaped by the teachers and administrators. Lay members of suburban boards lack the expertise and the time to shape most policies . . . generally they just review educators' own decisions and handle routine, trivial questions.

This pattern of relationships between lay boards and professional educators is typical of school district governance, whether urban or suburban, and originated in the 1890s and early 1900s within the municipal reform movement of that period. Reformers argued that professional experts rather than lay politicians should guide public agencies. In the late nineteenth century, public schools in New York City, as Ravitch (1975) reports, had poorly trained and low paid staffs, dependent upon political patronage for their appointments. Discipline for students was severe, teaching was largely by rote, and the dropout rate high. Reformers such as Joseph Rice claimed, ironically in the context of contemporary developments, that the system's failures were due to:

> the complexity and inefficiency of the decentralized system. The central problem, he thought, was that no one was accountable for errors. He proposed a radical reorganizaton, dividing the system's functions between an expert Board of Superintendents, which would have complete control of educational policies, and a central Board of Education, which would stick strictly to the system's business affairs (Ravitch, 1975: 4).

This division of labor between lay board and professional staff has come to be the prevailing model in American education. While the consequent professional dominance contradicts the concept of lay governance of public schooling, in practice, as discussed earlier, dependency upon local revenues constrains school-community relations in suburban areas in ways that favor the responsiveness of professional educators to lay, especially parental, preferences. For an understanding of how systemic dependency functions to structure interrelationships between parents and educators, we have Thompson's (1967) perspective on organizations as open systems.[10]

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10 Responsiveness of school districts to parental preferences is reflected in parental satisfaction. In surveying a national sample of high school districts, Zeigler and Jennings (1974: 125-28) asked parents: "In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing the school district?" On average, 33% of respondents in each district did not identify any problem. Of those citing a problem, the highest average across districts, 35%, named resource inputs, such as money and the need for more public support.

Organizational Responsiveness

In Thompson's (1967) view, an organization's dependency upon its social environment elicits an exchange relationship between the organization and elements in the environment. Specialized structures, such as PTAs and Parent Advisory Councils in the case of schools, are likely to be developed to mediate relationships across the organization-environment boundary. This mediation, which Thompson calls boundary-spanning, allows informaton about opinions within the social environment to come to the organization, and may entail some sharing of decision making in exchange for needed resource inputs.

In the case of school districts, dependency upon the electorate for tax revenues helps explain the importance that school administrators attach to the creation of PTAs at each school. Parent groups structure the posited exchange relationship between school officials and the more active parents. Especially in suburban communities, PTAs serve school personnel as sounding boards for parental opinion. They also provide a structure through which parents trade their support at the polls for influence over the decision-making processes that determine educational policies, processes largely under the control of district administrators. As Martin (1970: 148) concludes, on the basis of data from 200 suburban districts, public education "is in essence a special government program run by and for and with the valiant support of the population comprising parents with children of school age." As school district government generally is conducted on a non-partisan basis, partisan division being dysfunctional for public support of referenda, the parental population forms the basis for what becomes, in effect, a pro-school party structured by the PTA. This mutuality of interest among parents and professional educators creates an environment favoring responsiveness by school administrators to parental expectations as aggregated within parents' organizations, or similar support groups. To gain insight into the workings of the exchange relationship, it is helpful to look briefly at some suburban districts.

Suburban Examples

Examples of the influence exerted by parents are provided by the experiences of several elementary school districts in the Chicago suburbs. A particularly interesting case is that of Lake City, pseudonym for a wealthy suburb whose schools enjoy a nationwide reputation. (See O'Shea, 1971: 171-75). In this district, when studied in the 1960s, the posited exchange relationship between parents and schools was very evident. The PTA mobilized electoral support for referenda, which invariably passed, while the schools responded to demands channeled through the parents' organization. In the district, PTAs were well organized at each school. At the school level, principals were actively encouraged to be responsive

to their parents, and allowed some discretion over budget allocations with responsiveness in mind. For example: "One board member reported that in his home area there were a lot of artists and scientists. . . . These parents wanted art and science in the schools. To accomodate their demands, the principal worked out programs with parents who volunteered to help teach these subjects" (O'Shea, 1971: 171).

At the district level, the man who served as superintendent until 1966 reported that several programs originated with PTA pressure, including a special program for crippled children, foreign language instruction, and a family life program. In the case of foreign languages, organizational processes in shaping policy were supplemented by political action. Board approval had been refused on grounds of cost, but as the former superintendent recalled: "I was not above aiding and abetting the parents and indicated to them that they should let board members know their views. As a consequence, mail came in from all over town, and finally the board gave in" (O'Shea, 1971: 172).

In the case of the family life program, some parents wanted to add instruction on venereal disease to the junior high school program. To explore materials, a study committee was created by the PTA. This committee reviewed films being used by the high school, and recommended those thought suitable for the eighth grade. PTA proposals, according to the organization's president, generally were based upon extensive study. In the president's view, such preparation avoided the parents being thought of as busybodies. "As a result," she said, "the schools have always done what we asked" (O'Shea, 1971: 173).

Another pattern of school-community relations is exemplified by events in a district we call Winfield. Again, the population is largely white collar, but not as affluent as in Lake City. In this case three organizations mediated between the community and the school district; the PTA, National Council of Jewish Women, and League of Women Voters. Though the Jewish population was estimated to be 9% of the 30,000 residents of the district, the 200 members of the NCJW were a major source of electoral support for district referenda, and board elections. Consequently, proposals from the organization were taken very seriously by the superintendent. Every three years the local unit conducted a survey of the community to identify unmet needs. In 1964 the survey revealed the lack of a program in the schools for perceptually handicapped children. Following a public meeting organized by the NCJW, and articles in the local press, the board, on the superintendent's recommendation, authorized appointment of a teacher for the perceptually handicapped. The same NCJW group also launched a junior great books program, later adopted by the Winfield schools and staffed by volunteers who met with student groups twice each week.

While both Lake City and Winfield experienced specific curriculum related demands, pressures upon school officials were handled more covertly among the other 13 elementary districts studied, rather in the manner suggested by Dahl (1961: 156). The latter concluded that the PTA is

> useful to head off or settle conflicts between parents and the school system. A shrewd principal often uses the PTA to find out what problems are in the parents' minds; he then brings about some adjustments in the school's program or perhaps allays the concern of the parents simply by discussing the problem with them.

For example, in Newland (See O'Shea, 1971: 333), another wealthy suburb, board members could recall no demands from parents, a fact they attributed to the public awareness that "the schools are watched over by a particularly dedicated superintendent, and that we have an extensive and excellent curriculum." The superintendent, however, related lack of overt demands upon the board or administration to the fact that he had developed the educational program with parental wishes very much in mind. Having served the district since it was a rural community in the 1940s, the superintendent had watched the population change over time. The newer residents, he recalled,

> were relatively enlightened and well educated sons and daughters of old Lake Shore residents. They were interested in cultural activities, such as art and music, which traditionally have been incorporated into the school programs of neighboring communities. Having had this background themselves, the parents wanted it in turn for their own children (O'Shea, 1971: 333).

Apart from providing these programs, the superintendent also organized ungraded instruction through the third grade.

A similar responsiveness was found in another elementary district, Hamilton, whose population was less affluent than Newland's but again predominately white collar. Discussing demands from the public, the superintendent pointed out that the PTA provided a channel by which he and the staff were kept aware of parental sentiment. "The PTA," he noted, "provides an opportunity to determine the level of support for a program. If well received by the PTAs, you know there is support and you can move ahead" (O'Shea, 1971: 154). Further, as one board member pointed out:

> The parents demand a good background for their children, 80 percent of whom go on to college. At a PTA night you should hear the questions they ask! They want to know why the kids didn't have

more homework, or why they are not studying a particular subject. This puts pressure on the administration.

While cases reported thus far illustrate responsive administration, with supportive boards, in the context of the issue of local control the question arises as to what happens when the organization is unresponsive to parents in suburban areas. It is interesting to note that this is something more likely to happen in blue collar than in white collar communities, an outcome associated with the lower level of public participation in organizations in lower status areas. Consequently, boundary-spanning structures, such as the PTA, linking parents into organizational processes related to school district decision making are relatively weaker. In the districts studied, when leaders among the parents finally concluded that the educational system was not going to respond to their preferences on some important issue, they directed their efforts toward the governance rather than the organizational structure of the school district, moving to change the members of the board as an initial step toward getting changes in the organization. In blue collar districts, given the weakness of nonpolitical organizations, the typical structure utilized to mobilize public support behind a reform movement was a local political party, the one type of organization with well established linkages to residents in low income areas in the suburbs.

Among the fifteen districts studied (See O'Shea, 1971), eight served predominantly blue collar populations. Among these eight, between 1958 and 1968 four experienced parental revolts that changed their boards, and in three of these cases the new board subsequently replaced the superintendent.

Similar data emerged from Steinberg's (1976) study of a suburban school district in New York. In this district, three separate groups of parents emerged, each seeking a response from the schools to a separate problem. One group sought programs for retarded children; another wanted help for students with learning disabilities, and the third challenged the practive of teachers demanding unquestioning obedience and rule following, arguing that children should be required to develop their individuality and their problem solving skills.

By 1973 all these groups had succeeded in their objectives, but their success, as Steinberg (1976: 13) concludes

> was based not on the legitimacy of the issues but on the threat of votes against the budget. This is what local control in the suburbs is all about. The vote is a crucial weapon . . . about half of the taxpayers do not have children in the school system and the school board is dependent on parents for electoral support. Each of the three groups included parents who had been very active

in promoting the budget. The board finally had to take their interests seriously.

Essentially, therefore, suburban school district staffs have to manage dependency upon local resources in a situation where the parental population has a high level of what Minar (1966: 827) described as "resources of skills in communication, negotiation, persuasion, division of labor, and delegation of function," skills that translate into a relatively high density of membership organizations, and a capacity to rapidly mobilize the electorate around public issues, including education, in contrast to the situation in inner-city communities.

Inner-City Problems

Unresponsiveness of inner-city schools to their parental populations is associated with the absence of the two conditions found important for school responsiveness in suburban communities: system dependence upon access to local fiscal resources, and the presence of organizational resources within the school district population. In terms of both factors, inner-city communities are in a weak position. These communities generally are characterized by low family incomes and low per capita property valuation. Further, with regard to mobilizing parents, either to vote for referenda or to bring pressure upon school officials, organizational resources are few. Clark comments upon this latter problem in his introduction to Fantini, et al. (1970: xi), noting that:

> As most of the community action projects of the antipoverty program demonstrated, unfamiliarity with power and status, lack of experience with organizational skills, and apathy, disunity, and cynicism associated with long repression often characterize the communities of the poor, weakening their capacity to compete effectively with reinforced power and rendering the community vulnerable to those who would exploit it for their own ends.

The problem of organizational resources within inner-city communities is complex, but experience to date suggests that a possible solution is available through community development programs, along the lines of the war on poverty's community action. Such programs can create the necessary organizational infrastructure to mediate between the community and the schools. In fact, this is precisely what the community action programs succeeded in doing for a time in the 1960s, thus starting the whole movement for community control as discussed earlier. The potential of these programs is indicated further by developments in New York City's new Community School District 7, covering the poverty area of South Bronx, details of which have been reported by Zimet (1973).

Here, United Bronx Parents, a federally funded community program working among Puerto Rican residents, and poverty agencies such as the South Bronx Community Corporation and the Hunts Point Community Corporation, structure community influence over the schools.

> U.B.P. conducts educational workshops for parents covering such topics as "How to Organize a Parents Association," "What is Decentralization?" "How to Visit and Evaluate a School," "Training for Local Control," etc. For attending these workshops, parents receive a stipend of $7.00 per session to help offset the costs of a baby sitter and transportation. . . .
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> United Bronx Parents also gathers and maintains statistical data on the schools in the district, including ethnic composition of the student population and of the staff; age and utilization rate of the buildings; types of programs offered in each school; reading scores, class size, expenditure per pupil, and teacher experience by school. It has prepared analytical studies of the Board of Education's allocation of funds to District 7, of the budget for District 7 itself, and of the distribution of educational resources among the Bronx public schools. . . .
>
> United Bronx Parents is an ardent and militant protagonist for complete community control of the schools - control of school finances in particular. It has also pressed for the employment of black and Puerto Rican (especially Puerto Rican) teachers and supervisors in a proportion commensurate with the size of the black and Puerto Rican population in the district. . . .
>
> A recital of the formal activities of the U.B.P., extensive as they are, does not do justice to the scope of the group's influence. Its strength stems, in large part, from the fact that it is a grass-roots organization. It is able to extend its influence through interlocking memberships with other community organizations such as the anti-poverty agencies and through informal relations and even extended family relationships within the community at large (Zimet, 1973: 78-79).

Overall, therefore, the investment of poverty funds in South Bronx has had an important impact upon school-community linkages. Externally funded community programs, such as United Bronx Parents, help structure community-board relations. Also, as the Community District superintendent acknowledged, UBP acts as "a major channel of communication between the schools and parents" (Zimet, 1973: 79).

While these initiatives have yet to produce any measurable gains in the average level of student achievement produced by the schools, at

least parents and professionals now are cooperating in attacking the achievement problem together rather than letting student learning become the focus of conflict between the two groups. Institutionalization of accountability procedures at the school level as proposed, for example, by the Fleischmann Commission (1973: 7, 57-59), would reinforce the influence of community groups and parents.

Conclusion

In summary, therefore, it is apparent that by and large suburban school districts are responsive to parental preferences regarding the instructional program. This responsiveness is assured by a combination of fiscal dependency upon local resources and a relatively wide distribution of organizational skills among suburban residents, facilitating parental capacity to mobilize the public behind educational issues when necessary.

By contrast, in urban school districts residents of inner-city minority communities seldom are a crucial source of votes for educational issues, and these districts are not exclusively dependent upon the inner-city areas for tax revenues. To assure school system responsiveness to the preferences of inner-city parents requires, therefore, a source of leverage as an alternative to fiscal dependency, together with external funding to develop internal organizational resources to mobilize parents, and to help structure school-community relations. A potentially fruitful source of leverage is school level staff accountability to parents for attainment of mutually negotiated objectives, reinforced by the provision of the type of organizational resources that have been made available in some cities through community action programs.

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